POETRY
MARCH 2018

POETRY

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March 2018

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Consulting Editor	CHRISTINA PUGH
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POEMS

CARLA PANCIERA

Someone Asks Me to Consider Time

Kant says time is neither event nor thing.

Well, I think. That's that.

But then Teresa calls.
She's found my old letters.
There are dead dogs in them, old boyfriends;
the miscarriage is happening
(has happened)
and I have to catch a plane.
The plane has (not yet)
taken off.

Sundials, T squares,
heartbeats, and the equinox.
In places of worship, incense burns.
All to mark no thing.

Here, wind moves water in one direction,
then another. Some mornings,
nothing ripples, not leaves,
not iridescence on birdwing, beetle back.
Some mornings,
both: stillness, unrest.

Last season's loon calls.
And sometimes? I can't remember the lake
where I first heard that sound,
though the vision of it rises
through a paint-flecked pane.

On my morning walk: a hawk
perched on a telephone wire above
what used to be a hayfield:
rusted New Holland baler,

bobolinks and meadowlarks
saved from the mower.
That was a generation ago,
dead farmers, dead cows.

Now
is not the time,
moles, voles, mice,
to dart into the light.

Nothing stops in stillness
except solstice
when the sun stands still in declination.

I should tell someone this,
that we are not propelled beyond a moment
of observation, even loss, into something else:
field edge, lakeside, motherhood.
But that, instead, we are always
on our way.

On my return, the wire's empty.
The hawk has hunted or not,
is sated
or continues,
hungry.
Hunger, at least, returns.

Once, in different water,
my daughters waded naked
after mussels. Appendages,
these daughters were. I was
accustomed to the creases
behind their knees
where I kept their pulse.

Keep these, too: ships' bells and steeple chimes,
an hourglass, the pharaoh's water clock.

Now, on a floating dock,
my daughters sun themselves, swing limbs
above water that soon enough
will be ice.

These days, you can lift saliva
off the back of a stamp,
determine who licked it.
And that woman?
That sender?

She will have stopped
and she will
not yet
have stopped and she will still be

bleeding.

And Standing before Those Canvases, He Said, I Would Feel This Tingling

Some things no one says aloud.
But he was there if he says he was.

Bleaching fields and buttermilk.
The stench of breweries and lye.

Two-thirds of his life before this one? Sky.

His current city rises off a river not Lek,
though here in the gallery, a train ride away:

The impossible familiar. The somehow known.

The curator has written:
On the crowded ferry, cows attempt to drink.

But anyone can see that one scratches her neck,
a good-sailor cow, sickle-hocked, not parched.

Cows like that. Yes. He remembers.

Also that, downriver, float the fishmongers' baskets
of haddock and crab.

On the way home, this will be also his view,
the river running toward its source, a reverse birthing.

But now, he sees that Rembrandt has wired coils of light
into the shipbuilder's ruff.

He remembers shipbuilders, the horizon
upon which sailed their fluyts, and above which: homesick.

That was what we call a long time ago
because it has to be called something.

And now? The guard warns him back from one world.

Rose hip. Willow. Sea salt. The infinite clouds.

KAVEH AKBAR

Morning Prayer with Rat King

gravity accounts for the distance between weight
and mass it can also mean *alarming importance* human
bones are so full of gravity it's hard for us to
swim I lost my glasses chasing a branch in the ocean
which is far too deep to dredge sometimes

I imagine the sea's made of actual
tears this would explain the salt think of all
the disconsolate toddlers weeping right now into
the earth the tears must go somewhere it's important
to consider everything to name what we're able oceans

give us rain but we don't call rain *ocean* knot a dozen
rats together by the tail and you've got a *roi de rats*
which is harder than rain to hear in the night and
far less welcome who mourns a rat king
frustrated chthonic always the biter never the bitten

they give us the evil we need to stay moored to
good still I would break any promise to avoid finding
one O Terrible God of the Mechanical Age I am
your favorite pilgrim yet even I am finding it impossible
to speak to you now without asking for protection

Forfeiting My Mystique

It is pretty to be sweet
and full of pardon like
a flower perfuming the
hands that shred it, but
all piety leads to a single
point: the same paradise
where dead lab rats go.

If you live small you'll
be resurrected with the
small, a whole planet
of minor gods simpering
in the weeds. I don't know
anyone who would kill
anyone for me. As boys

my brother and I
would play love, me
drawing stars on
the soles of his feet,
him tickling my back.
Then we'd play harm,
him cataloging my sins

to the air, me throwing
him into furniture.
The algorithms for living
have always been
delicious and hollow,
like a beetle husk in a
spider's paw. Hafez said

fear is the cheapest room
in a house, that we ought
to live in better

conditions. I would
happily trade all my
knowing for plusher
carpet, higher ceilings.

Some nights I force
my brain to dream me
Persian by listening
to old home movies
as I fall asleep. In the
mornings I open my eyes
and spoil the séance. Am I

forfeiting my mystique?
All bodies become sicker
bodies. This is a kind of object
permanence, a curse bent
around our scalps resembling
grace only at the tattered
edges. It's so unsettling

to feel anything but good.
I wish I was only as cruel as
the first time I noticed
I was cruel, waving my tiny
shadow over a pond to scare
the copper minnows.
Rockabye, now I lay me

down, et cetera. The world
is what accumulates—
the mouth full of meat,
the earth full of meat.
My grandfather

taught his parrot
the ninety-nine holy

names of God. Al-Muzil:
The Humiliator. Al-Waarith:
The Heir. Once, after
my grandfather had been
dead for a year, I woke
from a dream (I was a
sultan guzzling flies

from a crystal boot) with
his walking cane deep
in my mouth. I kept sucking
until I fell back asleep.
There are only two bones
in the throat, and that's if you
count the clavicle. This

seems unsafe, overdelicate,
like I ought to ask for
a third. As if anyone
living would offer.
Corporeal friends are
spiritual enemies, said
Blake, probably gardening

in the nude. Today I'm trying
to scowl more, mismatch
my lingerie. Nobody
seems bothered enough.
Some saints spent their
whole childhoods biting
their teachers' hands and

sprinkling salt into spider-
webs, only to be redeemed
by a fluke shock
of grace just before
death. May I feather
into such a swan soon.
The Book of Things

Not to Touch gets longer
every day: on one
page, the handsome puppy
bred only for service. On
the next, my mother's
face. It's not even enough
to keep my hands to myself—

there's a whole chapter
about the parts of me
that could get me
into trouble. In Farsi,
we say jaya shomah khallee
when a beloved is absent
from our table—literally:

your place is empty.
I don't know why I waste
my time with the imprecision
of saying anything else,
like using a hacksaw
to slice a strawberry when
I have a razor in my

pocket. To the extent I am
necessary at all, I am
necessary like a roadside deer—

a thing to drive past, to catch
the white of, something
to make a person pause,
say, *look, a deer*.

DANEZ SMITH

how many of us have them?

friends! if i may interrupt right quick

i know y'all working, busy smoking & busy
trying not to smoke, busy with the kids & moms

& busy with alone, but i have just seen
two boys — yes, black — on bikes — also — summer children
basketball shorts & they outside shoes, wild

laughing bout something i couldn't hear
over my own holler, trying to steady
the wheel & not hit they asses as they swerved
frienddrunk, making their little loops, sun-lotioned

faces screwed up with that first & cleanest love
we forget to name as such, &, hear me out
i'm not trying to dis lil dude, but in this gold hour
he kind of looked like Francine off *Arthur*
same monkey mouth & all, ole & *i say hey* looking-ass boy

tho in a beautiful way, the best beautiful
same as i know all of us have looked
like something off when backlit by love. o loves,
y'all ugly asses have crowned me the worst names:
wayne brady, gay wiz khalifa, all kinds of bitches
& fags (tho only with my bitches & fags), all kinds

of shit &, once, mark of buddha that year acne
scored my forehead with its bumpy faith.
my niggas & my niggas who are not niggas
i been almost-pissed myself, almost been boxin'
been tears & snot off your dozen wonders
been the giddy swine dancing the flame.
o my many hearts, y'all booty-faced

weird-ass ole mojo-jojo-looking asses
dusty chambers where my living dwells
roast me. name me in the old ways, your shit-
talk a river i wade, howling until it takes me.
i can't stop laughing, more river wades
down my throat. could be drowning
could be becoming the water, could be
a baptism from the inside out.

don't save me, i don't wanna be saved.
i've died laughing before, been seen
god's face & you have her teeth, my nig.
but hers ain't as yellow as them saffron shits
you keep stashed in your gloryfoul mouth
my friend! my friends! my niggas! my wives!
i got a crush on each one of your dumb faces
smashing into my heart like idiot cardinals into glass
but i am a big-ass glass bird, a stupid monster

crashing through the window & becoming
it just to make you laugh. Andrew used to say
friendship is so friendship & ain't it
even after Andrew gave it on over to whatever
he was still my nigga. when they turned his body
to dust he was still my dusty-ass boy.
don't you hear it? the dust on the fan calls me
a bum, says my hairline looks like it's thinking
about retirement. the dust in the car says i look
like a chubby slave, says i look too drunk, takes

my keys, drives me home. the wind is tangled
with the dust of the dead homies, carrying us over
to them, giggling in the mirror. hear them. hear
your long-gone girl tease your hair on the bus. hear them
rolling when you sweep broom across the beaten floor.

i miss them. all the dead. how young. how silly
to miss what you will become. i apologize.
sometimes it just catches up in me. love
& ghost gets caught up in us like wind & birds
trapped in a sheet just the same. & my friends
is some birds, some chicken-head muhfuckas

who i would legit stomp a nigga for, do you feel me?
when they buried my nigga i put on my timbs
walked into that hot august tried to beat his name
out the dirt. i beat the earth like a nigga.
i threw hands at the earth like a punk muhfucka
& the ground chuckled, said *my nigga. what is you doing!*
you can't hear the wind drunk off the kindred lent?
can you hear that great roll from way off like a big nigga
laughing in an alley! how your dead auntie laugh
when she see you still ain't grew into that big-ass head!
like your real friend laugh when you still the same ugly
as yesterday! same ugly as always! same ugly as their last life!

jumped!

there, on the ground like dirt or a bird
december froze & may thawed, blood

misted, crying for any mother, the boy
who called your mama a bitch bleeds

our love for you, his wings frozen & fighting
the cold wind of our sneakers.

we storm him because we love you
& your mama has fed us & only us

is allowed to call her out her name
because we know her name, Ms. Jones,

& she bad & only we can say that
& when we bad she has permission

from our mamas to beat us like we hers.
we hers like you hers. you our boy.

we pool our punches into the boy
like quarters for a bag of flaming hots.

we make him look like a bag of flaming hots.
lord forgive me, but i don't regret it.

&, on the real, all these summers later,
i miss it. i wish a little bit to gather around

a man's body & stomp in the name of love,
beat what he said about my next to blood

back into his vermilion mouth, to make
his mouth a beautiful, smashed tomato.

really tho. Leland, you remember
how we beat that nigga? our middle

school ritual, that thirty-second eternity.
later, i licked his blood off my nikes

& dreamed we were water lilies
holding the water down.

•

they were around me like

nigga1

nigga2 nigga3

nigga4 me nigga5

nigga6 nigga7

nigga8

& i felt … safe?

what could be safer
than a circle of boys
too afraid of killing you
to kill you?

the fists that broke my ribs also wanted me to live.

i praise each one true god
for each foot that was not
a sharp anything.

i had always wanted 8 niggas on me (but not) like that.

each hand laid upon me like a rude & starving prayer.

after a while i started to like it
i leaned into it unblocked my face

the bottoms of their shoes were the sweet of a well-chewed eraser.
i was their promise. their ink.

you should have heard them laugh
a language so delicious i cracked up cracked grin & all.

i didn't know
a thing about love
until those boys
walked away
so happy.

my heart pouring from my nose.

sometimes i wish i felt the side effects

but there is no proof but proof
no mark but the good news

that there is no bad news yet. again.
i wish i knew the nausea, its thick yell

in the morning, the pregnant proof
that in you, life swells. i know

i'm not a mother, but i know what it is
to nurse a thing you want to kill

but can't. you learn to love it. yes.
i love my sweet virus. it is my proof

of life, my toxic angel, wasted utopia
what makes my blood my blood.

i understand belle now, how she could
love the beast. if you stare at fangs

long enough, even fangs pink
with your own blood look soft.

•

low-key, later, it felt like i got it
out the way, to finally know it

up close, see it in the mirror.
it doesn't feel good to say that.

it doesn't feel good to know
your need outweighed your fear.

i braved a stupid ocean. a man.
i waded in his stupid waters.

i took his stupid salt & let it
brine my skin, took his stupid

fish into my hands & bit into it
like a flapping plum. i kissed at

his stupid coral & stupid algae.
it was stupid. silly really. i knew nothing

that easy to get & good to feel
isn't also trying to eat you.

•

knew what could happen. needed
no snake. grew the fruit myself.

was the vine & the rain & the light.
the dirt was me. the hands drilling

into the dirt were my hands.
i made the blade that cut me down.

but i only knew how to live
when i knew how i'll die.

i want to live. think i mean it.
take the pill even on the days

i think i won't survive myself.
gave my body a shot. love myself

at least that much. thank you, me.
thank you, pill, seafoam & bland.

thank you, sick blood, my first husband
dead river bright with salmon.

dogs!

scooby-doo was trying to tell us
something when every time that
monster mask got snatched off it
was a greedy white dude.

•

in '97, a black comic gets on stage,
says, *you ever notice how white dogs
be like woof woof & black dogs be like
ruff ruff motherfuckaaaaa!!*

•

the dog upstairs won't shut up &
i've thought of ending his little noisy
life but i have to remember he
matters he matters & if i did the
brown girl upstairs would cry
forever.

•

dog (n.): a man's best friend. (see:
fetch, roll over, K-9, good boy, put
down.) ex. *my dog died, I had to do it
with my own hands.*

dawg (n.): a man's best friend. (see:
blunt rolled already, handshake, my
nigga, put me on.) ex. *my dawg died,
he did it with his own hands.*

•

dogs in this house eat the same thing we do. we eat greens, he eat greens. fried bologna, neck bones, leftovers.

> ... he died from the
> suga, the gout or whatever
> came for big mama came
> back for the dog.

•

everybody love Lassie, but what about Sounder?

•

possible rite of passage #37: graduating from outrunning the block's dogs to outrunning the block's police.

•

i too have been called boy & expected to come, kneel.

•

what Animorph did you want to be? i wanted to be the boy who turned into the bird limp in the dog's wet mouth, holding me toward his human saying *I made this for you.*

•

the dog upstairs needs to stop
running his mouth talking all that
shit I can hear him up there fool
don't think i understand he don't
know i got a bark too teeth too
thumbs & a terrible child's mind.

•

something about *Air Bud* felt...
the talented obedient beast, the
roar of the eggshell crowd.

•

dogs aren't racist but they can be
trained to be so as can the water
as can the trees as can gravity as
can anything marked by a pale
hand & turned bloodgold a bitter
king's magic touch.

•

i'm the kind of werewolf that
turns into a shih tzu. ruff ruff
motherfucka.

•

while my grandmama spoke on the clean blood of Jesus i watched the hounds in the mud hot for anything warm & thought of something better to worship.

•

i stand in the dark bathroom in my tightest shortest shorts my vaselined legs the only things catching light. i say *i'm a real bitch* 3 times, clap my hands above my head. nothing happens. i walk back into the club, put my hand on a man's chest & it's a paw.

•

the gay agenda made *CatDog* to offer your child's gender to their seven-headed god.

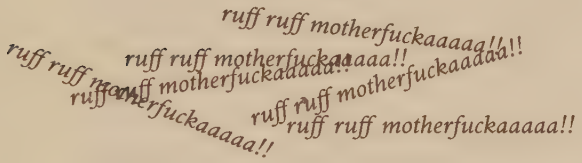
•

a dead dog is a hero, a dead lion is a hero, a cloned sheep is a miracle, a dead child is a tragedy (depending on the color, the nation, the occupation or non-occupation of the parents).

•

during the new moon i switch
from an –a to the traditional –er, i
raid the farm, smash the melon
patch, swallow chickens whole,
spit out the bones ground down
to smoke, howl *Geee-zuss!* toward
the sky's great nothing.

•



•

dog bred to smell the coke/dog
bred to smell the bomb/dog bred to
smell the nigger hid beneath the
floorboards.

•

dude's dog won't leave the room
won't let his lord out of his sight
won't let his master disappear won't
let himself go hungry won't let
nothing happen to the one who
brings the water even if it means
being owned, being witness to his
hunger. or maybe he's just dumb.

•

stay. open. stay. look at me. stay.
open. teeth. bad. bad. stay. open.
treat. treat. pant. wag. treat. good.
stay. good. stay.

•

i listen to DMX smoking a blunt
doing bout 90 in a 55 when the cop
ask if i know why he pulled me over
i say *i'm just trying to be me.*

•

the dog upstairs won't shut up but i
can't hate him he's up there alone all
day making noise must be the only
way he knows he's not a ghost.

Letter to My Father

October 2017

You once said: *My reward for this life will be a thousand pounds of dirt shoveled in my face.* You were wrong. You are seven pounds of ashes in a box, a Puerto Rican flag wrapped around you, next to a red brick from the house in Utuado where you were born, all crammed together on my bookshelf. You taught me there is no God, no life after this life, so I know you are not watching me type this letter over my shoulder.

When I was a boy, you were God. I watched from the seventh floor of the projects as you walked down into the street to stop a public execution. A big man caught a small man stealing his car, and everyone in Brooklyn heard the car alarm wail of the condemned: *He's killing me.* At a word from you, the executioner's hand slipped from the hair of the thief. *The kid was high*, was all you said when you came back to us.

When I was a boy, and you were God, we flew to Puerto Rico. You said: *My grandfather was the mayor of Utuado. His name was Buenaventura. That means good fortune.* I believed in your grandfather's name. I heard the tree frogs chanting to each other all night. I saw banana leaf and elephant palm sprouting from the mountain's belly. I gnawed the mango's pit, and the sweet yellow hair stuck between my teeth. I said to you: *You came from another planet. How did you do it?* You said: *Every morning, just before I woke up, I saw the mountains.*

Every morning, I see the mountains. In Utuado, three sisters, all in their seventies, all bedridden, all Pentecostales who only left the house for church, lay sleeping on mattresses spread across the floor when the hurricane gutted the mountain the way a butcher slices open a dangled pig, and a rolling wall of mud buried them, leaving the fourth sister to stagger into the street, screaming like an unheeded prophet about the end of the world. In Utuado, a man who cultivated a garden of aguacate and carambola, feeding the avocado and star fruit to his nieces from New York, saw the trees in his garden beheaded all at once like the soldiers of a beaten army, and so hanged himself. In Utuado, a welder and a handyman rigged a pulley with a shopping cart to ferry rice and beans across the river where the bridge collapsed, witnessed the cart swaying above so many hands, then raised a sign that told the helicopters: *Campamento los Olvidados: Camp of the Forgotten.*

Los olvidados wait seven hours in line for a government meal of Skittles and Vienna sausage, or a tarp to cover the bones of a house with no roof, as the fungus grows on their skin from sleeping on mattresses drenched with the spit of the hurricane. They drink the brown water, waiting for microscopic monsters in their bellies to visit plagues upon them. A nurse says: *These people are going to have an epidemic. These people are going to die.* The president flips rolls of paper towels to a crowd at a church in Guaynabo, Zeus lobbing thunderbolts on the locked ward of his delusions. Down the block, cousin Ricardo, Bernice's boy, says that somebody stole his can of diesel. I heard somebody ask you once what Puerto Rico needed to be free. And you said: *Tres pulgadas de sangre en la calle: Three inches of blood in the street.* Now, three inches of mud flow through the streets of Utuado, and troops patrol the town, as if guarding the vein of copper in the ground, as if a shovel digging graves in the backyard might strike the ore below, as if la brigada swinging machetes to clear the road might remember the last uprising.

I know you are not God. I have the proof: seven pounds of ashes in a box on my bookshelf. Gods do not die, and yet I want you to be God again. Stride from the crowd to seize the president's arm before another roll of paper towels sails away. Thunder Spanish obscenities in his face. Banish him to a roofless rainstorm in Utuado, so he unravels, one soaked sheet after another, till there is nothing left but his cardboard heart.

I promised myself I would stop talking to you, white box of gray grit. You were deaf even before you died. Hear my promise now: I will take you to the mountains, where houses lost like ships at sea rise blue and yellow from the mud. I will open my hands. I will scatter your ashes in Utuado.

CAMONGHNE FELIX

Willing in the Orisha

I.

My body a full echo I dawdle down to the creek

Ask the god of blood for
Abundance continuity

My offering the syrup of pressed beans &
A 7-winged tulip

II.

Later the rains swell the creek with coffee the storm a beckoned sheet
The immortal herself reaping the earth the tongues cut out of the cows

III.

I walk in as the wash attempts its valiant swallow of fields
A cafeteria aid wipes the cotton from the counter

Her bald eyes aurora with seeds

You brought that didn't you?

IV.

My bottom lip a pink venom My desire a valley with
legs His steady fingers toying the tea I look
up to a straight line and bury it Can't downsize what
hithers me

Every now & then a troubled thirst
opens my mouth for a song that does not come
I feel it all
until a fixed voice decides

No but wait you're the water

SARAH GAMBITO

Charlottesville Curriculum

I am afraid of your transcendental death.
When people say think of a man. I think of a brown man.
Sometimes the earth grows khella because she can feel our suffering.
Yooooooing beneath Costco tikis.

When people say think of a man. I think of a white man.
I am meant to hold you in your oblique pain, your map-driven pain.
Yooooooing beneath Costco tikis.
I was drunk holding my teeth in like students.

I am meant to hold you in your oblique pain, your map-driven pain.
You die like an actor.
I was drunk holding my teeth in like students.
My body was a brown dog I shoved back into the water.

You die like an actor.
I beseeched but couldn't stay out of the first person.
My body was a brown dog I shoved back into the water.
Hold me, hold me, hold me, holdmeholdmeholdme.

I beseeched but couldn't stay out of the first person.
Where does it hurt, we say.
Hold me, hold me, hold me, holdmeholdmeholdme.
I am afraid of your transcendental death.

GERALDINE CLARKSON

Simplify the Universe with a Pie Chart

Daily, daily scathing roughens the psyche
and veils are unhinged. I too was a planet,
planed and waterless. Wolf-roved. Our roofs
leaked, mischievous sisters locked the Mother General
out in the garth where she prayed to the Foundress
and the dead and the living looked on, entombed
and disapproving. Gray nuns, grave, gave out.
There was weeping in every stall.
Though the stalls be empty of cattle, we trust.
Though our intellects rust, we grow tweedy-brown
and opportunistic, feeding off morsels.
A cosmos of relics in the crypt and a senior
sister led the laity around brilliantly by a
twisted adamantine-ringed nose, to see
broken finger bones, bloody cloths, brains.
Blood so blue and white we redden and hide
our film-star faces. Cagey.
Margaret crushed by a door. Martha martyred
by a window overlooking the park,
with swaggering ducks and blinding water.
Paddlers. What if you had held a grudge,
fondled it, and found that you had fallen in love?
He has turned up finally, his jaw like the suspension
bridge, magnetized with stubble, cheekbones like girders.
Oh no, I am not a cliché. See my inside.
Ten years inside but without the comforts of bantam mornings.
Bodies on beds shimmied into corners with shifty valances.
    September blues.
Fat satin. Sidling in from the green room. In the gut, a vagabond
ache like disgust. I walk cumbersome honesty sideways
through several doors, park her in the smoky alley.
Pull up compunction by his Jaeger collar, kiss his spandrel nose,
expel him into the snowy street.
I relish jealousy on the side with copious dressing.
Feed depression to a gull called Guillaume

on a bleak beach during lunch break.
Simplify the universe with a pie chart
and chomp down three-quarters of it with mustard and beer.

CORTNEY LAMAR CHARLESTON

Hate Is a Strong Word

Muscular as a stallion in fact—
but I have no horse in this race of people against people.

It was made certain I wouldn't, that I'd inherit nothing
except a whipping of my hindquarters as a form of correction,
in the cadence of *I love you, tar baby, I love you.*

This is not unlike how my parents were raised, to comply,
and their parents before them, and theirs before them and so forth
as far back as anyone cared to speak of what they lived
through, the preposterous preposition of it all.

Therefore and thereafter, whenever I hear the word *pedigree*,
I think of the blank check I don't have behind my name,
and then I think of saddles and stirrups, and then
the soreness of my lower back, and then the source of that.

How a boss can *ride* you: of this I am personally familiar,
plus know by blood drawn from two lines of family men
forced to cut out their own tongues to keep food on the table
they could no longer taste or even stand to.

Their tongues grew back, yes, after some time and with
sharpness I'm told, needing to cut against something,
anything, to be purposeful given their new forms.

Woe! Woe! Woe! How a man rides his wife, his children,
how he'd ride a horse he'll never have, could never give them
unless said horse is immaterial, hence not a horse at all—

just muscular, as a stallion is, as a word is that's denied
striving families horsepower, any engine beyond their
fragile bodies to propel them forward; the whole race:
forward, even if it pits people against a people,
even if it means rearing a rear end tender and raw.

I love you, tar baby, I love you
something strong.

MARTHA SILANO

Ode to Autocorrect

Because it changes O'Hare to o hate,
o hate, o hate — over and over, no matter
how many times I retype it. O hate, like

an American tune, an American fable
where, yo, you can enter an o hate
bathroom, take a selfie in the mirror

cuz your sister wants to see the pockets
of your Great American Rhinestone Jeans.
Because, on a street called Viewpoint,

I get home becomes *I get guns*, off a road
on a mission to kill every squirrel-ish
pedestrian. Because he was packing,

concealed, threatening to use it, use
his hands or feet. *My feet*, iamb
of a son of a birch, of a brick chatting

with the devil, with God, with a listener
not listening. Because he'd gone bonnets,
his garden bounty a faded wine, his wife's

linguine a longing for a golden ear,
so I took her to the botanical gardens
in my getaway car, to a fruit on a vine,

but the limes went lemur, the night to nonfat,
the clear to catastrophic. Because driving away
from the *frog man* croaking hypocrite,

heavenly went down like a melting hedge,
a gal gone hog-tied, a fish crying, a tiger-
tiger togetherness, flight or fucked,

a heart, stroked, racing to its vicarious
carousel, a fungus lashed to a beam gone
beleaguered. Because he will kill her,

that's his plan: to kill us all. Can't commit
or commute, can't debone his breath,
can't take his acute paranoia, chalk it up

to cute. Because this here's a Josie
madhouse, a bedroom bedrock-locked.
Because *Blvd* morphed to *Bled*, spirit

summoned with a Ouija board. Because
soap holder went *love hen*, though love
had flown the Calycanthus

like the grilled portobellos messing
with his vowels. Please *please*, I pleaded
to the pleading day. Because prayer

is like a bread line, a penny for your
exploded mind. Because *lots of logs*
to you, ma, because *so sorry* went *poem*.

NATHAN SPOON

Cuddly in Camo

Here comes rain on our roof!
It stays just long enough
to tickle me into writing this.

It stays just long enough
for everybody to get into
a pair of PJs (silk-cotton blend)

and then goes poof! At our best
we exude awesomeness. At our best
we are destined to turn pale

with the rest of humanity.
We are awesome and quick as
decomposing sticks at a trail's

end. We bend dreams into circles
of green zone satire. We have
mahogany stuffed in our mahogany

ears. To all who are not us
we are sorry to say You're welcome!
Nature thankfully adores a rumor!

A sunset! A glacier! Clouds
glimmer and cast inevitable
shadows off the groundswell

footrest. I remember you from
that time before we first met
when our eyes were wet

like summertime coasters
as we Ubered noiselessly
between pews. The aristocrats

are failing to panhandle via email.
One aristocrat is sleepily winding
through the face of another.

ANSELM BERRIGAN

In Betweener

The sun got its new angel wings tee-shirt
smudged with the sandbox's finest
demi-mud. This would render
appearances partial, with a cornball's
incongruence. Sidewalk chalk radioactive
Well, we'll never write that letter to
the lozenges, I mean that shrinking
postcard on the way to Saturn
Will someone please hand me
my martini, so I can
make it through this
The awful ordeal?
title Name there
placed in the palm
the of your natural
action tremor
off-center
rendering that floating
green eye, well
it floated
off onto some
bell somewhere
Yesterday's duck
seemed to have three parents: a vulture
a turkey, & a something
a plastic
shapeliness
unaccountably
signaling Dark Star
Winged creatures
suspend shyness

& we were stabbed
with permission

all over
& again, the assemblages
of guilt
frozen in dispossession

Did that closet just murmur?

"No mere solar beam can harm the lord of photosynthesis"

"No barrier can stop one who dwells between all boundaries"

"Welcome back to life, my former foes"

"& be tied to the end of your string/flying in the air babes at night"

9/4/16
Tompkins Square Park

HIEU MINH NGUYEN

Outbound

Past the congested interstate, past the long lines
outside the Dorothy Day Center, past the cheering bleachers,
the steam rising from the coach's face, the fathers straining in prayer,

past the rusting letters on the marquee, the dim lights along Main,
the couples who will fuck during the movie & the couples who won't,
past the frozen orchard, past the defaced statue of a saint, a dog

chews thin the leather cord around his neck. The opposite of hunger
is not satisfaction, it is birth. It is what makes a man chisel a face into
stone.
It is what drives the body to lie in the fresh snow. It is what quiets
the world

when she pulls you in close. It is the winning pass, the crowd too busy
counting down to notice. The world puts its mouth on you
& you don't say a thing. The world digs a hole in your yard

& it's up to you to fill it, up to you to find something useful
to do with your sadness. Strange, the yellow beetle, dried
between the pages of the dictionary, staining the page

with its flattened body — its outline, a dirty halo circling
the word *pleased* — please, you've circled the same two blocks in search
of a place to park, circled the yard howling a name that won't respond,

but you still think you know enough to call *that* enough?
The boat smacks against the dock it's tied to. Your mother
fixes your father's tie before closing the casket.

Everyone you loved refused to die in this town
before they died in this town. The woman beside you
on the plane wants to know where you're going.

Staying Quiet

Once, a man named a thing *beautiful* & so we wore it,
buried it, turned it into currency. Somewhere, maybe here, maybe now,
I stand completely still until he looks in my direction. Sometimes I don't
believe I exist until someone calls me beautiful. Sometimes
any warm thing will do. Sometimes it's me, a warm thing in the low
light. *Beautiful* is what the man called me after he did
what he wanted with — I'm running out of ways to describe it
— my body, my silence. Beautiful. Why, I ask, in order to love
yourself must you, first, be loved? A bone sucked clean
of its marrow. A trail of ants magnified into ash. & of course,
I'm asking no one. & of course, I know the answer.
Of course, I know it's not me they're looking for, the men, I mean.
& I wished he didn't feel the need to speak, really wished — like me
— he just kept quiet, but no, he had to speak, he had to say *beautiful* —
& now, goddamnit, my body appears, trapped in the long tunnel
of a telescope. & now I am here attending the aftermath
of my own ruin, with nothing but *beautiful* to keep me company.
Maybe he meant the city beyond the window.
Maybe he was talking to himself. Maybe *beautiful*, as in *good job*,
as in *look what I just did with my own two hands.*

EILEEN MYLES

Dear Adam

I said cake

I said top hat

I said microphone

four little golden baby heads

wait I said pirate ghost

wait wait I said closed eye smiling cat

he scrawled back oh my god

I thought fuck yeah I can read this at the marathon

he said Eileen smiles

ehhh I can use it

the bell of my computer rang

same message

wait the cat is crying with relief

the cat is a devil now

the cat is not mad

the cat making racialized jazz

uh or not my white hands

I'm talking to everyone now.

and I'm using a filter. No I'm not

I acknowledge that there is an
image of me twice. I only recently

learned the term jazz hands

if we fucked Pennsylvania up what is our

hope to live in a stolen country that was always stolen

and worked largely by stolen people. Out of a conservative

diaspora came I mongrel poet from Massachusetts

to make my mark

love & these things and opportunities

to speak. We can't fall down we teem in the new opportunity
we discover what resistance means

our time & blowing up the inside of my computer

buck studies

the phone says delivered

what is.

Adam says did you see my beard.

We talk about money awhile

I ride my bike. Get off the phone goes
ding. It's his beard calling. I go oh.

you have what I want.

he says lol

then skull

then rocket

then turkey

green pistol

and a flame. I

don't know what to say back to that

I say bike and go.

A hundred per cent

I would like

a century

a tree

grows slow

a crack

of light

hits my palm

while I'm

reading

I grab

to take

a picture

& the crack

is gone

branches

pouring

out of my

hands

days has made

its mark

I have

wind

swept

hair I think

of my step

brother

who I knew

more

like this

his face

a photo

graph

on a beach

on a

book &

when he died

I was

family

watching

a tree in

the wind

& I wanted

to speak

to him

who was

truly my

brother

that speck

of light is gone

on my

hand and

him. I told

her I'd probably

like to

end here

like my com

puters

do & my

dog did. I took

a chance

w horrifying

her. I'm

shooting

for this

love where

I live. See

me dying

now or running

across

the beach

to catch

the tree

book

cover in the end

of summer's

wind. The ocean

is a feast

& it's here

I bring my

water tree book

feet, taste

branches

the lot that

is me

who wants

a century.

Transmission

I'm overcome

by the cruelty

of nature

no I mean

I'm with

it. And each

little capacity

it has

can't be transferred

I mean

a spruce

can't give

its oils to you

can it.

But that's how

it grows

in the ab

sence of

technology

my thoughts

grow. My thoughts

grow among

trees

but I don't

help them

though

I'm for them.

I'm for my

dog & inci

dentally

I feed

her but I

don't see

her much.

Joe does.

Joe is

my friend

& also

a dog father

I don't

help mountains

Mountains

help me

I know

the planet

is old

& splashy

sleep helps

me. Time

helps

me. My mother

helped

me. And

now she

is gone. She

also hurt

me so it's

good that

she's gone.

I can grow

different

in the

day or

three decades

in which

I've got

left

I can

grow toward

the mountains

sit in solidarity

with prisoners

or go

to jail. I'm not joking

I can

push different.

I want

to say

something

about my cunt.

Because

that's

what you

ask. But

I am

alone. No

mother

no phone

just a notebook

& a cunt

& my thoughts.

I don't

even think

my thoughts.

You do.

FRANCES LEVISTON

White Box

Of Tribulation, these are They,
Denoted by the White.
—Emily Dickinson

Pained, permanent
wakefulness

Exposed
in the split geode

a Santa's grotto
Jagged milk

quartz crusts
constitute

every surface—
a mouth

all teeth
self-sharpening

like sea urchins'—
"Uncomfortably beautiful"

toughened glass
spikes

in the doorways
of award-

winning offices
—rough

sleepers from the womb
condemned

to make of anything succulent
rock

of porticoes
iron maidens

LANI O'HANLON

Back Up Quick They're Hippies

That was the year we drove
into the commune in Cornwall.
"Jesus Jim," mam said,
"back up quick they're hippies."

Through the car window,
tents, row after row, flaps open,
long-haired men and women
curled around each other like babies

and the babies themselves
wandered naked across the grass.

I reached for the handle, ready, almost,
to open the door, drop out and away
from my sister's aggressive thighs,
Daddy's slapping hands.

Back home in the Dandelion Market
I unlearnt the steps my mother taught,
bought a headband, an afghan coat,
a fringed skirt — leather skin.

Barefoot on common grass I lay down with kin.

FROM "55 × 5"

ALAN THOMAS

5
5.1
5.
Via Mobile

SQUAD
5

5

Relax
Züge fahren
alle
Minuten
5
Train comes
every
minutes
Zum Hauptbahnhof
To the central station

NO
LIFEGUARD
ON DUTY
5

5

5¢

No 5

Why five? Because five has a certain authority: the Torah has five books, Islam has five pillars, my hand has five fingers. Because the number five is beautiful in form—the ampersand of numerals. Because William Carlos Williams "saw the figure 5/in gold/on a red/firetruck/moving/tense/unheeded," and Charles Demuth paid homage to Williams's poem in a great painting, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In Greenwich Village in 2016, I saw the hook-and-ladder truck belonging to FDNY Ladder Company 5 idling on Sixth Avenue. I asked the crew if they knew that the Met had a painting of their 5. "Of course," they said, "we have a poster of it framed in our station house."

—*Alan Thomas*

THE VIEW FROM HERE

"The View from Here" is an occasional feature in which people from various fields comment on their experience of poetry.

Fred Lonberg-Holm and Lotte Anker. Photograph by Peter Gannushkin.

JOHN CORBETT

Made of the Ceiling a Wall

What has been most useful to me about poetry is its capacity for obliquity. As a prose writer, I have been at pains to compose more clearly and directly. Once tolerant of abstruse or dense passages in my own work, I've come to see them most often as evidence of incomplete thinking or bad craftsmanship. I try to repeatedly ask myself what exactly it is I'm trying to say, and then say it. Strip away the oblique; leave a solid sentence behind. Chisel yourself a single good line and a fiction writer as consistently strong as Denis Johnson or Lydia Davis or Wright Morris will begin to seem like a magician.

When I was a child, my father insisted that I learn "Jabberwocky" by heart. All those made-up words and florid rhymes gave me my first inklings that language could be exciting; recitations provided me an initial taste of poetic verse, and Lewis Carroll's work offered a natural transition to Dada nonsense and James Joyce. Since I first started seeking it out as a high school sophomore, poetry has remained a safe haven for the tangential and inferential, a charmed circle for oblique kinds of meaning making. That's not to say imprecise. A poem can be oblique and still be absolutely precise. In my daily life, among the mundanities of ordering an espresso and hammering out a business deal for my gallery, I turn to a book of poetry or a single stanza to temporarily lose my way, to loosen syntactical shackles, to experiment with tones and line shapes, to break into another rhythm, to think and feel with an unfamiliar part of my brain, to savor a phrase on my tongue like a lemon drop.

•

I read poetry the way I listen to improvised music.

It's not so important to interpret an improvisation as it is to experience it. If I listen to a duet by saxophonist Lotte Anker and cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm, I let their improvisation work on me, I absorb the music and try to follow the energies of the musicians, the performance's overall direction, and amalgamations of sound rather than worry over every little possible meaning. When Sonny Rollins solos on "Strode Rode," I could tell you about the way he works within

the form, his proximity to the bar lines, the harmonic choices, the urgency of his playing, and the two-way telepathy he shares with drummer Max Roach — all good stuff — but I would also miss some of the juiciest bits. I think a listener is best served by suspending the conventional desire to have the music tell them something specific in favor of its obliquity. So, too, when I devour Charles Reznikoff, Theodore Roethke, Susan Howe, Sonia Sanchez, Blaise Cendrars, or Nathaniel Mackey, or when I listen to a reading by Tom Raworth or Jayne Cortez. Meaning is more confluence than specificity, more journey than arrival.

If it's well done, neither an improvisation nor a poem can be paraphrased. It exists at its ideal concentration. It can't be boiled down. To adequately understand it, you have to experience it at full scale. No abstract; no précis. When, in "Barely, Twombly," Clark Coolidge writes,

> I hadn't thought, but you could
> Tap on a sled, a matter
> Three times removed from water
> Made of the ceiling a wall
> No one walks any further

I could tell you what I think he means but I don't need to, because I would be repeating him. If I wanted to tell you about a passage of improvised music, the best I could do is to play a recording of it for you.

•

I read poetry the way I look at paintings.

Whether they are abstract or figurative, painterly or hard-edged, I am drawn to the jostle between the form of a painting and whatever that form might "say," be it something literal or poetic. That interaction between the material manifestation and some kind of signification is the place where a painter, or a poet, puts a little skin in the game. Take a painting by Otto Dix, a portrait for instance, which is clearly designed to signify something specific. It might be a condemnation of decadent, petit bourgeois society, but if that were all Dix wanted from the work he could have evoked that in a few descriptive words. Instead, it needed all the green hues and pimply surfaces and craggy lines to achieve its meaning in all fulsomeness.

Dude (2013), by Charline von Heyl. Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

I view Charline Von Heyl's paintings as existing on a precious and precarious perch between the representable and the ineffable, her spaces and objects depicted therein vibrating with a certain unanswerable set of questions. What is that? Where is it? What does it relate to? What are its boundaries? How does it relate to its boundaries? How do its parts fit together? Does it resemble anything I already know? Anything I've seen before? In that resemblance, is it appearing or is it disintegrating? If I reach for an explanation of the painting, does it exceed my grasp? Where would I expect the picture to resolve and does it resolve there? Or does it dissemble and reanimate elsewhere?

These are the species of questions that poetry has opened up for me, between the representable and the ineffable, where the concrete and the inexplicable rub shoulders, a chance to wonder, to "get it" and maybe even to sense how it works, but not necessarily to understand on any overt level. Maintaining an oblique sense of significance lurking like nine-tenths of an iceberg.

One final thing: a place poems do resolve — in books. I love them. I buy them. Chapbooks, mimeo sheets, handmade paper. Bern Porter and d.a. levy; Burning Deck and Perishable Press. Numbered and signed with font details spelled out lovingly in the colophon.

But the point of the work is to dissolve, not resolve. At the climax of one song, Captain Beefheart sings a line that I've always thought of as an ode to the oblique, a paean to the caustic mission of poetry:

> God, please fuck my mind for good
> Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee
> Oh fuck that thing, fuck that poem.

BATHSHEBA NEMEROVSKI

Poetry, You Win

Here I am, later riser, haircutter, part-time musician, reluctant business owner. My job is creative and visual and social, but never literary. So I always want to talk about books and reading and writing so that part of my brain doesn't wither and die. I have cut the hair of many writers, poets, and readers, and we often talk about what we're reading, why we're reading it, and how what we're reading is affecting us at the moment. I am always curious about what people are reading and ... whether or not I should? What am I missing? I'm always surprised when I find out that someone is a reader of poetry, like they're part of some secret club that I can't decide if I want to join.

I always think that I don't like poetry, I'm too cool for poetry, I'm pragmatic, I'm punk, I'm everything a poetry reader isn't. Who needs all those feelings? Give me the spare prose of Hemingway, something tough. But then I'll be walking through my neighborhood and I'll think of the Bukowski poem, "sway with me," which I used to recite to myself over and over as a teenager and declared my FAVORITE POEM in the way that you have a BEST FRIEND, until you don't.

> used books, used people
> used flowers, used love
> I need you
> I need you
> I need you.

At the time, I thought, this poem is COOL, I can like poetry and still be COOL and PUNK. Lots of things I thought were cool from that era of my life, like the band the Dayglo Abortions, don't hold up, but some, like that Bukowski poem and the first Damned record, really do. Even as I've thankfully stopped caring about what's cool and what isn't, otherwise known as no longer being a teenager, that poem still makes me feel like I am a person who could like poetry, despite me being me and not that person who I imagine is allowed to like poetry — like maybe a grad student? Or someone who wears a lot of linen?

I've had a lot of BEST FRIENDS since I memorized that Bukowski poem. When I first self-identified as a feminist in college, I would read Patti Smith lyrics and think they were better than any poems, and I still kind of do. During my mid-nineties minimalist phase, when all I wanted to wear was Jil Sander and Helmut Lang, E.E. Cummings was my favorite poet. How few pieces of furniture can you have? How little punctuation can you use? There was also a brief druggy phase where I listened to a lot of Can and read and reread *Howl*, but that was more of an affectation, like when you say *Eraserhead* is your favorite movie. Um, no it's not, you actually love *Pretty in Pink*.

don't
be
sil
ly

—From *[why]* by E.E. Cummings

Then, recently, a friend who is, like, a for-real legit poet gave me a book of poems by John Ashbery, and I was like, damn. This is the real deal. I'm not ready for this. It had been a long time since I'd read any poems at all, and I considered carrying the book around and pretending I was reading it, like everyone did with *Infinite Jest* when it came out, so that I'd either absorb its contents through osmosis or I'd eventually be so bored that I'd actually crack it open and read it. But it was kinda too heavy to carry around so I just stuck it on a shelf and forgot about it. I finally dragged it out months later out of guilt and shame, and, holy shit! I didn't know words could be this good!

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.
You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.

—From *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*

FINE, POETRY, YOU WIN. I feel slightly stupid for never having heard of Ashbery before, but also kinda smart because at least I discovered him while he was still alive. But now, best friend, let's make up for lost time.

I mean there is no escape
From me, from it. The night is itself sleep
And what goes on in it, the naming of the wind,
Our notes to each other, always repeated, always the same.

— From *A Love Poem*

JOHN RONAN

Brick by Brick, Word by Word

I make my living as an architect and one of my favorite buildings is a poem. It was constructed in 1966 by Seamus Heaney and I make periodic return visits to it and, like any great work of architecture, I find something new each time. Like the best buildings, it provides a memorable experience that touches all the senses. When Heaney describes "Under my window, a clean rasping sound/When the spade sinks into the gravelly ground," I can hear the sound of shovel hitting gravel. And when he writes about new potatoes, "Loving their cool hardness in our hands," my own hand involuntarily contracts as my sense of touch is activated. Likewise, I can smell "the cold smell of potato mould" in my nose, while the onomatopoeia of Heaney's "the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat" transports me to a bog. And when he describes his grandfather pausing his backbreaking work to drink bottled milk, I taste it, too. Through language, he creates a three-dimensional space that I can inhabit, and his observations and memories beckon me to enter.

Heaney constructs his poem like a skilled mason using common brick. As he builds the poem word by word, what becomes so striking is the sheer ordinariness of both its subject and language. Heaney doesn't resort to inventing words (though who knew a "drill" was a furrow?); when he writes "between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests; snug as a gun," even a kid can understand it. Through the precise selection and controlled arrangement of words, the common act of digging in an Irish peat bog is made extraordinary, and the mundane becomes transcendent. This use of commonplace language makes the poem's architecture all the more impressive, and sends us the reassuring (yet somewhat intimidating) message: Look, it's all there hiding in plain sight.

Heaney situates his poem carefully, creating what architects like to call "a sense of place," resisting generic recall when he claims, "My grandfather cut more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog." He describes not just any bog, but a specific place which his language invites us to imagine (substitute "the" for "Toner's" and see how the atmosphere changes). In a subtle and deft act of transference, his deeply-rooted memories become ours.

I often ask myself: Why does this poem stick in my head? What makes it special? The conclusion I have come to is that, like all great works of art, it endeavors not to be noticed, but to be remembered. And to succeed in being memorable something must make an emotional connection. Heaney achieves this with an impressive economy of means — in eight short stanzas constructing a space for us to inhabit and inviting us in; a place with its own smells, sights, sounds, tastes, and textures. As his pen digs into the past, the palpable admiration he describes for his father and grandfather — despite their different paths in life — begins to register, causing us to think about our own relationships, our own choices. Heaney's work is personal, but not about self-expression (which would exclude us). It has its own order and form like a memorable piece of architecture, its beginning and end slightly asymmetrical but purposely so. From "Digging":

> But I've no spade to follow men like them.
>
> Between my finger and my thumb
> The squat pen rests.
> I'll dig with it.

We are all poets, Heaney seems to imply, and just as he digs with his pen, for us it is a matter of finding an instrument through which to find our own voice. As an architect, I write with wood, concrete, glass, and metal, calling attention to those things that are in plain sight but hard to see. In my line of work, materials are the words, buildings the poems. And just as Heaney crafts poetry through the careful selection and ordering of words, I endeavor to thoughtfully select and arrange materials in a way that creates authentic experiences in which people form meaningful bonds. If I am doing my job correctly, the building will unfold space by space like a poem unfolds line by line, and each visit will yield new discoveries. Like Heaney, I am conscious of those who came before me and whose legacy I extend. In my case, it is skilled Chicago architects from a tough, no-nonsense town that values hard work, but who managed to transcend pragmatism and extract a certain poetry from it. Their digging is what I see when I look out the window of my office (by God, they could handle a spade, too). I follow in their path, planting in their drills, searching for the transcendent within the pragmatic. Occasionally I succeed, and the building becomes a poem.

HE ARTIST
Mrs. Burroughs has traveled widely throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico. Her trips to Europe have taken her to the U.S.S.R. where she was leader of an invited delegation of black artists in 1966. In 1968 she was the recipient of an N.E.H. Fellowship as an interne at the Field Museum of Chicago majoring in museum practices. In the summer of 1968 Mrs. Burroughs studied in Africa with
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grant from the Rockefeller Fo
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SOUND-A-RAMA
PRESENTS
MRS. MARGARET T. BURROUGHS
THE FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR
OF THE DUSABLE MUSEUM OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY
Arkie Music
(BMI)
Produced By
Sound-O-Rama
SDR 101
Side 1
33 1/3 RPM
1. WHAT SHALL I TELL MY CHILDREN WHO ARE BLACK? - M. Burroughs
2. WHEN I WAS A CHILD I WAS ASHAMED OF AFRICA - M. Burroughs
3. HOMAGE TO BLACK MADONNAS - M. Burroughs
A Product of Sound-O-Rama - Chicago, Illinois
A SOUND-A-RAMA RE

Sound-A-Rama Presents Mrs. Margaret T. Burroughs, the Founder and Director of the DuSable Museum of African American History (Arkie Music, BMI).

DAMON LOCKS

Digging Culture

The truth, so often obscured and omitted.
And I find I have much to say to my black children.
— Margaret Burroughs

About six months ago, I was digging through the record shelves of Beverly Records looking for classic jams. It is the kind of record store where, if you are lucky, you can fill out your collection with some of those deep cuts that make you think of a younger time when songs permeated your consciousness. It is a great spot to give your deejay record crate a little boost. I was looking for "And the Beat Goes On" as well as, "(Olivia) Lost and Turned Out" by the Whispers. I found a 12 inch of "And the Beat Goes On" but I was out of luck with "Olivia." My official search was over. My friends were still knee-deep in vinyl at the listening station weighing the merits of The Chambers Brothers' *New Generation*. I had time to satiate my other endless quest. For almost as long as I have been collecting records filled with songs, I have also been collecting records with no songs at all. It started with sounds that sparked my young mind, like tales of superheroes or soundtracks to animated feature films. In the last twenty-five years it branched out to tales of the black experience, speeches, history, stories, and poetry.

To find these records, you must go to the sections that are less frequently searched: the "spoken word" section. Beverly Records is a perfect place to locate a surprising gem. Certainly, few people are looking through the spoken word section in a "dusties" hot spot. I asked to be directed to the section. It took the folks that worked there a few minutes to find it themselves as it had recently been moved. The section was in the back and I had to stand on a chair to reach it. The tightly packed shelf was filled with the usual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X records, and had multiple copies of the great three-volume set of *Adventures in Negro History*. I then pulled out a record without a sleeve. Inside the plastic sleeve that held the jacketless record, there was a xerox print of a woodcut of a woman with a little girl on her lap. The album was a recording of artist, educator, museum director, and poet Dr. Margaret Burroughs.

It appeared to be a record of her reciting her poems from the collection *What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?* (1968). I was thrilled. This is the kind of find that comes around very rarely. This record would not only have material that I would be able to use in one of my sound pieces, but was a piece of Black history that would be lost without this slab of vinyl. Burroughs did have a book of these pieces but to be able to hear her read them herself—those are moments, active, caught in perpetual audible revelation.

Dr. Margaret Burroughs, who founded the DuSable Museum of African American History and was a founder of the South Side Community Art Center. Dr. Margaret Burroughs, who worked tirelessly at Stateville Correctional Center teaching art to incarcerated artists. Dr. Margaret Burroughs, who has won too many accolades to mention here. Dr. Margaret Burroughs, an inspiration, someone who walked a path to uplift Black culture while the US actively oppressed it. Her voice is caring. She reads her words with confidence. Her tone is resolute. She sounds like someone I would like, someone I would like to ask about teaching art at Stateville, a job I do now. The poetry has an immediacy as the sound of her words hits the air. The past and present have no delineation. Her words speak to me. They help clarify work that still needs to be done.

As I prepare for an upcoming solo visual art show and several performances, I find myself listening to *What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?*, realizing that I am one of those children (born in 1968). I feel an obligation to continue on with the work she and so many others put into play before me. Poems with the titles "When We Look at Ourselves" and "Let It Be Known" continue to stress Black self-empowerment. This time we are living in seems in so many ways as racially charged as when this record was made. Today, an affirmation is needed to validate Black life and it is still controversial. How will we survive this era? I wonder, what shall I tell the children now? Maybe I should play them this record.

> And since this story is so often obscured,
> I must sacrifice to find it for my children,
> even as I sacrifice to feed, clothe and shelter them.
> So this I will do for them if I love them.
> None will do it for me.
>
> —From *What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?*

COMMENT

Shadows Hard as Board

Selected Poems of Thom Gunn, ed. Clive Wilmer.
Faber & Faber. £16.99.

In his introduction to this fine, vital, note-enriched edition of Thom Gunn's poems, Clive Wilmer argues for — a paradox to unpack — Gunn's style of unique impersonality:

> People used to talk in the 1960s — perhaps they still do — about true poets "finding their own voices." Gunn appeared not to have a distinctive voice. Indeed, he appeared to have no wish to find one.

Reading this, I pause. My pencil-end hovers, before marking the margin. Wilmer knows, surely, that blurbists (and not only they) have, alas, never stopped speaking thus. "I am not 'confessional' by nature," Gunn said; Sylvia Plath is "the last person I want to be!"; "Lowell ... is obviously central to our period in many ways, even if sometimes I cannot help wishing he wasn't." Movement poets (the label came from *The Spectator*, and never sufficed, for Gunn or the rest) revealed themselves more quietly, in verse larded with English speech-fillers — or, as linguists have it, "hedges" — *perhaps*, and *I suppose*, and the rest. (Donald Davie, a transatlantic migrant like Gunn, criticized his own verse for its good manners.) Gunn's "Expression," which he began writing, Wilmer informs us, in May 1977, turns from the melodrama of "very poetic poetry," to an "early Italian altar piece" of the virgin and child:

> The sight quenches, like water
> after too much birthday cake.
> Solidly there, mother and child
> stare outward, two pairs of matching eyes
> void of expression.

The poem's last word repeats its title, placing under scrutiny a concept central to the modern lyric. Painting also plays this corrective role in

a poem written almost two decades earlier, as Gunn's verse, in firm form, manages the miracle of seeming to emit perception unmolested by personality. The first stanza of "In Santa Maria del Popolo," from his third book, *My Sad Captains* (1961):

> Waiting for when the sun an hour or less
> Conveniently oblique makes visible
> The painting on one wall of this recess
> By Caravaggio, of the Roman School,
> I see how shadow in the painting brims
> With a real shadow, drowning all shapes out
> But a dim horse's haunch and various limbs,
> Until the very subject is in doubt.

An "I" appears, and "conveniently" is witty. But the plaited rhythms and perception-enhancing meter really conjure the equivalent of a painting in verse. The speaker is present, but as a point-of-view in the literal, and not the opinionating, sense. Why should his feelings obtrude, when the data can be given us untainted?

Gunn refused to position himself as a "gay poet"—though he wrote directly, and with compassionate acuity, about the sex lives of gay men (early on, he pretended a woman addressee in some of his poems). Of his poem "Carnal Knowledge," in his first collection, *Fighting Terms* (1954), he claimed: "anyone aware that I am homosexual is likely to misread the whole poem." Against Gunn's wishes, one could limn a psycho-biographical trajectory in his *Selected Poems*: once he moved to San Francisco, shortly after the publication of *Fighting Terms*, he began to write more openly about being gay, and he also accepted, with refinements, the idea of a free verse capable of true spontaneity. You could say the uptight Brit loosened up once he crossed the pond. But Gunn always accepted control and impulse as interlocking elements: he continued to write both freely and formally. He insisted on a verse tradition of greater antiquity than creative writing programs like to admit—he was a great admirer, for instance, of Ben Jonson, who reveals, in Gunn's words, that "artifice is not necessarily the antithesis of sincerity"—and liked to make remarks such as: "in his attraction to inherently awkward material, Ginsberg resembles Hardy"; or, "I want to be an Elizabethan poet. I want to write with the same kind of anonymity that you get in the same way somebody like Ben Jonson did. At the same time I want to

write in my own century." As a gay man, he was fortunate to live in the twentieth and not the seventeenth. But we shouldn't claim, of his life, and his desires, simply a case of pre-Stonewall opacity replaced by post-Stonewall candor, or of individual self-liberation (that'd be where the myth of "voice" comes in, and, as stated, he was no confessionalist). As Gunn wrote in "My Life Up to Now": "My life insists on continuities — between America and England, between free verse and metre, between vision and everyday consciousness."

Wilmer's selection is the ideal place to begin with Gunn — the major poems are here, and the facts of their provenance (over seventy pages of this book are given over to notes); sequences arrive happily entire. Wilmer is truly selective — he rightly takes just five poems from Gunn's first book. His second volume, *The Sense of Movement* (1957), made his reputation in England, and produced a couple of masterpieces. "On the Move," the first poem in the collection, is one:

> On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
> Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the Boys,
> Until the distance throws them forth, their hum
> Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
> In goggles, donned impersonality,
> In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
> They strap in doubt — by hiding it, robust —
> And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

Equally inspired by, or obsessed with, the films of Marlon Brando and the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, this is very much a young man's poem, but few young men can write like this. In his criticism Gunn speaks eloquently, and vividly, the language of metrical verse, and this poem uses variations in the pentameter available for centuries in the service of a contemporary astonishment. (The assonance, and the inverted first foot, which outlines those "bulges"!)

In "On the Move," the verse-rhythm is already more susceptible, and uncertain, than it seems. The commas in the first two lines quoted are marvelously controlled — a delight for the savoring ear — but they also register that "doubt" which is eventually strapped in and hidden (where the fitting of rhyme to rhyme is the poet's own version of this process). Writing of Thomas Hardy, Gunn says his "poetry is almost always robust, never fretful or neurotic." Yet, in this poem, the hidden neurosis is acknowledged. And we shouldn't

miss, in either the essay on Hardy or "On the Move," the genuinely mitigating (rather than habitual) word "almost" — as crucial here as when it appears twice at the close of Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," from which it tends to vanish whenever that poem is sentimentally quoted. The internal rhyme with "dust" and "robust" emphasizes the word: Gunn won't *wholly* idealize his kinetic toughs.

Comparing this with the verse of his following books, we see how Gunn gradually learned to combine his rhymes with soft-hard meter. "In Santa Maria del Popolo" is slicker, less insistent and more insinuating — the syntactical distensions have become second nature. In 1965, Gunn collaborated with his brother Ander on the photo-book *Positives* (only "The Old Woman" makes the cut here); two years later, *Touch* appeared, containing the sequence "Misanthropos" (solipsism diagrammed, with a diamond-point chisel), and also the famous title poem. Here sexuality is held in abeyance, allowing a space for the metaphysical; the speaker melts toward, and into, his lover, and the experience requires of the poet a newly limber free verse:

> You are already
> asleep. I lower
> myself in next to
> you, my skin slightly
> numb with the restraint
> of habits, the patina of
> self, the black frost
> of outsideness, so that even
> unclothed it is
> a resilient chilly
> hardness, a superficially
> malleable, dead
> rubbery texture.

Present tense takes us directly into the scene. The conceptual language is tactfully makeshift. It captures that distance which can arrive between lovers at, it seems, any time — a sort of stubbornness which comes of the fear, perhaps, of being absorbed. The speaker has grown "cold," in both the literal and the emotional sense. His partner turns and holds him:

do
you know who
I am or am I
your mother or
the nearest human being to
hold on to in a
dreamed pogrom.

The lineaments of identity are shed, as Gunn seeks an experience, however elementary and insentient, that's universally shared. The infant's bond with the mother, global atrocities -- this is the world in which we live, and where we find our happiness, or not at all.

What I, now loosened,
sink into is an old
big place, it is
there already, for
you are already
there.

The first line of the poem returns. Now there's no holding back:

What is more, the place is
not found but seeps
from our touch in
continuous creation, dark
enclosing cocoon round
ourselves alone, dark
wide realm where we
walk with everyone.

Wilmer explains that continuous creation "is one of the theories of the origin of the universe, sometimes called the 'steady-state theory,' in which the universe has no beginning and no end"; his gloss also relates the poem to Donne's "The Good-Morrow," and "The World," by Robert Creeley. Open form licenses the poet to seek, as we watch, for the correct word — and to find it. The separate shape of each lover is lost within the "cocoon" that both isolates them in a realm of two — which, for Donne, is grandiosely its own kingdom — and unites them, in tenderness, with "everyone." Soft *w* sounds, slipping

from the repeated word "what," provide the momentum. You can't speak the lines without shaping your lips, as if for so many kisses.

There is a feeling, in Gunn, that sinuosities of syntax, given the scaffold of rhyme, and proved upon the pulse of meter, cannot fail in the quest for complexity; he has a habit of relentlessly finessing a perception until the rhymes begin to self-generate, and the metaphysical contortions produced as a result are mannered, not cognitive. Rococo, not rational, though Gunn's no-nonsense aesthetic — he was hard on poets like James Wright, for writing disconnectedly — packages these flourishes as a strict logic. This tendency survives into *Moly* (1971), and "For Signs," whose second stanza, and what follows, can't live up to the first:

1

In front of me, the palings of a fence
Throw shadows hard as board across the weeds;
The cracked enamel of a chicken bowl
Gleams like another moon; each clump of reeds
Is split with darkness and yet bristles whole.
The field survives, but with a difference.

2

And sleep like moonlight drifts and clings to shape.
My mind, which learns its freedom every day,
Sinks into vacancy but cannot rest.
While moonlight floods the pillow where it lay,
It walks among the past, weeping, obsessed,
Trying to master it and learn escape.

The last three lines are superfluous: they only fill out the form, with a bit of mind-body confusion. A "mind" can't lie on a pillow, or walk "among the past, weeping"; nor can the perfectionist's cleaving to ten syllables excuse the compressed clumsiness of "learn escape."

The first stanza gives us, as Gunn writes of a poem-opening of Fulke Greville's, the spectacle of "the observing intelligence ... making careful distinctions." Gunn scopes out the area (he did two years of national service); posits certainties; and goes on from there.

"Hardness was a quality," he writes,

> sought after by the avant-garde poet during the period marked approximately by the years 1910 to 1925. It was considered a corrective to what appeared the softness of the poetry in the years preceding. It took the form of an emphasis on clarity, explicitness, and sharpness of language and image, accompanied by an equal emphasis on objectivity or the appearance of it.

"That is a summary," writes Gunn — this in "Three Hard Women," a review of H.D, Marianne Moore, and Mina Loy — "of what everybody knows already." Yet, as the context suggests, he's particularly alert to the gendering of hardness, a concept bound to identity, and how porous to other people's desires, and other people's voices, any of us wishes to be. His unashamedly phallocentric poetry is aware of how the rigidity of a penis may be premised on an individual or a collaborative denial of the erect organ's in fact surpassing vulnerability. Gunn's persons, as well as his objects, would be invincibly solid, but the tropes of armor, containment, and the bulletproof libido learn to self-scrutinize. "An Amorous Debate," from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976):

> Then a tremor passed
> through his body, the sheen
> fell from him, he
> became wholly sensitive
> as if his body had
> rolled back its own foreskin.

Wilmer can't help but exclude some of the briefer, lighthearted verse which, in the Faber *Collected*, allow the reader a breathing space. "Courage, a Tale," for example, also appeared in *Jack Straw's Castle*:

> There was a Child
> who heard from another Child
> that if you masturbate 100 times
> it kills you.
>
> This gave him pause;
> he certainly slowed down quite a bit

and also
kept count.

.....

The 99th time
was simply unavoidable.

Weeks passed.

And then he thought
Fuck it
it's worth dying for,

and half an hour later
the score rose from 99 to 105.

I love the paced humor: how the indentations exaggerated by William Carlos Williams into a tendentious philosophy of the "variable foot" appear here as the stand-up comedian's pauses for effect. Keeping "count" gives way, impudently, to keeping "score." Interviewed by Wilmer, Gunn said "stylistic concerns" have to do

> with impulses and decisions in our lives in all aspects. Impulses, of their nature, are kind of open-ended and we have impulses all the time. We also make decisions all the time and those are closed, like closed lines in poetry, they're like metre, they're considered. Our lives are mixtures of those. So I continue to have sympathies with both kinds of poetry.... I'm surprised that everybody doesn't.

Gunn's known for oscillating stringently between, as he terms it here, "open-ended" and "closed" forms. He's many-sided, and knows others are too: admiring of the hard lines of individual identity, he nevertheless takes out his eraser. Sometimes one feels solid — elsewhere, a series of impulsive mental occasions, or, as Yeats had it, a "bundle of accident." And so Gunn's own "mixture" of poems, both light and heavy (refusing to provide a picture of the major, male poet before which to prostrate ourselves), also refutes a voice-led poetics.

Both pair-bonded and promiscuous, Gunn was, in his sexual adventures, formidably and self-endangeringly exposed, all his life, to the other. He died in his seventies of, probably, a drug overdose, having perceived the unjealous open-form lusts and loves of the San Francisco scene as an unrealized utopia, "the community of the carnal heart":

> That's what we were part of, a visionary carnal politics. No wonder Blake was often cited!... The 1970s were the time, as I heard someone say later, of a great hedonistic experiment.... As hippies were the indirect heirs of the communists between World Wars, so we were the direct heirs of the hippies, drug-visionaries also. At the baths, or in less organized activity, there was a shared sense of adventure, thrilling, hilarious, *experimental*.

Gunn listed in his notebook, at the end of the sixties, what he took for the stages of "Self-Education." More young man's theorizing, but there's something to it:

1. Nobody watches him, not even himself.
2. He imitates, to be like others.
3. He endows himself with an identity, to be unlike others.
4. He seeks purposes.
5. He seeks to lose identity, to join everyone.

Those stuck at stage three, or four, haven't quite made it. The list is, one assumes, self-addressing, self-critical. Not aloof but agonized. Gunn's verse worries at the matter, inhabiting the question without arrogance, or a claim to exemption. "To lose identity" suggests the mystic's hunt for nirvana, or T.S. Eliot's catty remark on the desirability of impersonality, at least for those who know what it's like to have a personality.

Gunn wished to write in the "plain style," or, as his essay on Hardy has it, "the reflective mode" which has accreted over centuries of verse in English:

> It does seem to me that the related family lines of the ballad and the reflective lyric, joined by ties of economy and impersonality, have run permanently through English literature as providing in some sense a style that is always available. For

> their very neutrality and adaptability to new content, they have remained possible styles for about five hundred years, while other and equally impressive modes have been born, reached maturity, and died. The reflective mode I am speaking of is, as I emphasize, essentially impersonal, essentially non-confessional. It is concerned with its subject to the extent of excluding the speaker's personality, even when his emotion is the subject of the poem (as it often is) — for he sees his emotion as one which anybody in his situation would be able to feel.

In Isherwood he found a "colloquial directness of style" that has "been around since the early eighteenth century.... It is in the nature of a bequest to us — like the plain-style of the Elizabethan poets, it is useful for any subject-matter, flexible and all-purpose as it is." But, as August Kleinzahler notes, Gunn's plain style isn't "colloquial," not exactly. Consider "The Miracle," which, published in 1982 in *The Passages of Joy*, doesn't appear in Wilmer's selection:

> "There in the rest room. He pulled down my fly,
> And through his shirt I felt him warm and trim.
> I squeezed his nipples and began to cry
> At losing this, my miracle, so slim
> That I could grip my wrist in back of him.
>
> "Then suddenly he dropped down on one knee
> Right by the urinal in his only suit
> And let it fly, saying Keep it there for me,
> And smiling up. I can still see him shoot.
> Look at that snail-track on the toe of my boot."

The man's speech is denatured — Gunn isn't trying to reproduce the way anyone would actually talk, and this roundly flouts one of the central imperatives of US verse. (For an English person, "rest room," presented here as two words, is a phrase one never quite gets used to: Gunn's poem holds, and tests, the dubious phrase for a moment on its tongue.) The closest one gets to this elsewhere is in verse translation, where another writer might provide a version of Dante, or Ovid, in which people speak with this preternatural transpicuousness.

Gunn is a great poet of the long-term, if not monogamous, relationship. The key poem here — besides "Touch" — is "The Hug,"

from *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992). Unlike its predecessor, "The Hug" is anecdotal, down-to-earth — told in the past, not the present, tense. Its verse-sounds concentrate, rather than dissolve, the feeling of separateness, in combination with strong rhymes:

> I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,
> Suddenly, from behind,
> In which the full lengths of our bodies pressed:
> Your instep to my heel,
> My shoulder-blades against your chest.

It ends:

> My quick sleep had deleted all
> Of intervening time and place.
> I only knew
> The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.

Yet what intervenes between this poem and "Touch," published twenty-five years earlier, isn't only a change of style — "Rhythmic form and subject matter are locked in a permanent embrace" — but, to speak frankly, AIDS. The deletion of personal limits in the first poem — the snowflake of identity, turned to a drop of happily impersonal water in the sea — is replaced by a protective carapace. The men lock together like Roman soldiers in a testudo. A cultural shift has occurred, as well as the evolution of a long-term relationship. "The dryness of the embrace," writes Tom Sleigh,

> marks the transition from sexual to domestic love, from the physical joy of sex to the physical joy of being held by someone with whom a life has been shared. Now, what heterosexual male poet would celebrate such a transition? Presumably, that poet would say how sexual attraction was attendant on the hug; or else the poet would lament the passing of such passion.

A subtle point, relating to the contexts in which gay verse is read, the assumptions a reader makes. Though Gunn surely draws, here, on Jonson's famous translation from Petronius Arbiter — "Doing, a filthy pleasure is, and short;/And done, we straight repent us of the sport" — whose less bleakly postcoital close should be as well known:

Let us together closely lie, and kiss,
There is no labour, nor no shame in this;
This hath pleased, doth please, and long will please; never
Can this decay, but is beginning ever.

Here the comma-riddled lines aren't "halting," exactly: they linger, wishing the moment to last forever. Defending Jonson's court-role, his dependence on patrons and commissions, Gunn insisted that all poetry is "occasional" in its own way, and in *The Man with Night Sweats*, AIDS provides the occasion:

You wrote us messages on a pad, amused
At one time that you had your nurse confused
Who, seeing you reconciled after four years
With your grey father, both of you in tears,
Asked if this was at last your "special friend"
(The one you waited for until the end).
"She sings," you wrote, "a Philippine folk song
To wake me in the morning... It is long
And very pretty."
— From *Lament*

You wouldn't replace a word: the cadences could not be less arbitrary, less idiosyncratic. In a remarkable vindication of Gunn's plain style, the rhyme of "years" with "tears," one of the most hackneyed in the tradition, more than earns its place.

CONTRIBUTORS

KAVEH AKBAR is founder and editor of *Divedapper* and author of *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* (Alice James Books, 2017) and the chapbook *Portrait of the Alcoholic* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017).

ANSELM BERRIGAN* is editor of *What Is Poetry? (Just Kidding, I Know You Know): Interviews from the Poetry Project Newsletter (1983–2009)* (Wave Books, 2017). His books include *Primitive State* (Edge Books, 2015).

CORTNEY LAMAR CHARLESTON is the author of *Telepathologies* (Saturnalia Books, 2017) and is a 2017 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellow.

GERALDINE CLARKSON has two chapbooks: *Dora Incites the Sea-Scribbler to Lament* (smith|doorstop, 2016) and *Declare* (Shearsman Books, 2016).

JOHN CORBETT* is a writer and curator based in Chicago. His recent books include *Vinyl Freak: Love Letters to a Dying Medium* (Duke University Press, 2017). He is co-owner of Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery.

MARTÍN ESPADA'S* latest book of poems is *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed* (W.W. Norton, 2016). He has received the Shelley Memorial Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

CAMONGHNE FELIX is a poet, political strategist, media junkie, and cultural worker. Her debut full-length collection of poems, *Build Yourself a Boat*, is forthcoming from Haymarket Books in April 2019.

SARAH GAMBITO is director of creative writing and associate professor at Fordham University and cofounder of Kundiman. Her poetry collection *Loves You* (Persea Books) is forthcoming.

FRANCES LEVISTON'S *Disinformation* was published by Picador in 2015. She lectures at the University of Manchester.

DAMON LOCKS* is a Chicago-based visual artist, educator, vocalist, musician, and deejay. He was a 2016 MAKER Grant awardee and a 2017 Soros Justice Fellow.

EILEEN MYLES is a poet, novelist, and art journalist living in NYC

and Marfa, Texas. *Afterglow (a dog memoir)* was published by Grove Press in 2017 and *Evolution* (poems) is out in the fall.

BATHSHEBA NEMEROVSKI* lives in Chicago. She cuts hair, plays music, sleeps late, and is excellent at mixing patterns.

HIEU MINH NGUYEN is a Vietnamese American poet and performer. He's the author of the forthcoming *Not Here* (Coffee House Press, 2018) and *This Way to the Sugar* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2014).

LANI O'HANLON is the writer in residence at Molly Keane Writers Retreats and reader in residence with Waterford Libraries. She was shortlisted for the 2017 Hennessy New Irish Writing Award.

CARLA PANCIERA* has published two collections of poetry; the most recent is *No Day, No Dusk, No Love* (Bordighera Press, 2010). Her short story collection, *Bewildered* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), received AWP's 2013 Grace Paley Prize.

VIDYAN RAVINTHIRAN's books are *Elizabeth Bishop's Prosaic* (Bucknell University Press, 2015) and *Grun-tu-molani* (Bloodaxe Books, 2014). He is an editor at *Prac Crit* and teaches at the University of Birmingham.

JOHN RONAN* is founding principal of John Ronan Architects and the John and Jeanne Rowe Endowed Chair Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology College of Architecture.

MARTHA SILANO's books include *Reckless Lovely* (2014) and *The Little Office of the Immaculate Conception* (2011), both from Saturnalia Books.

DANEZ SMITH's three books include *Homie* (2020), and the National Book Award finalist *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), both published by Graywolf Press. They cohost the podcast *VS* with Franny Choi.

NATHAN SPOON* is the author of *Doomsday Bunker* (Swan World, 2017) and *My Name Is Gretchen Merryweather* (hardPressed poetry, 2017).

ALAN THOMAS* is a publisher and photographer whose work has appeared in *Design Observer*, *Places Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He is editorial director at the University of Chicago Press.

* First appearance in *Poetry*.

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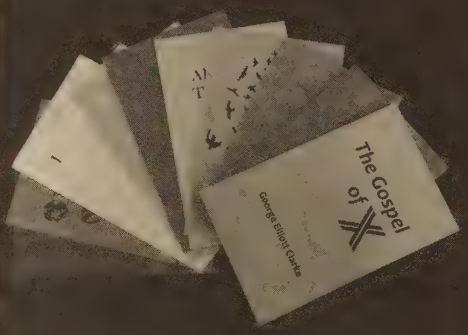

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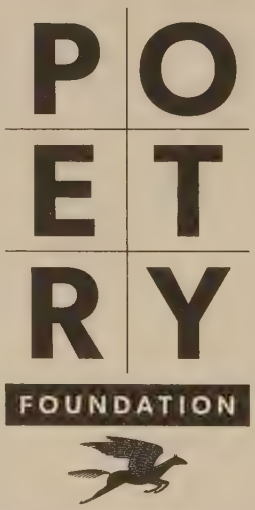

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Poetry editors **Don Share** and **Lindsay Garbutt** talk to contributors and share their poem selections from this issue with listeners.

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For Women's History Month, listen to ***A Change of World***, our six-episode series exploring the intersections between poetry and the women's movement.

POETRYNOW
March's four-minute episodes feature new poems by **Kit Robinson, Vi Khi Nao, Johannes Göransson,** and **Rodney Koeneke.** Produced in partnership with the WFMT Radio Network.

Podcasts are available free from the iTunes store and on poetryfoundation.org.

HARRIET BLOG

March's featured blogger, **Hayan Charara**, discusses poetry, craft, and the writing life of a poet at poetryfoundation.org/harriet.

POETRY FOUNDATION .ORG

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Poetry & Art
ELLEN ROTHENBERG, NATHANAËL, JUDD MORRISSEY & JENNIFER SCAPPETTONE
Thursday, March 1, 7:00 PM
Poetry Foundation

Poetry off the Shelf
JAVIER ZAMORA
Tuesday, March 22, 7:00 PM
Poetry Foundation

Poetry off the Shelf
JORIE GRAHAM
Thursday, March 29, 7:00 PM
Poetry Foundation

EXHIBITION

AVA KADISHSON SCHIEBER: *here I am*
January 10 – March 28, 2018
Monday – Friday, 11:00 AM – 4:00 PM

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